

Factors Influencing Faculty Engagement— Then, Now, and Future

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What an interesting exercise to reflect on an article you published 17 years ago! In the late 1990s, I participated as a team member in the evaluation processes of several multi-institutional grant programs. This work provided the opportunity to gather similar data across 32 diverse institutions, using the same protocols and methods. Those processes systematically collected data across faculty, students, community partners, and institutional leaders. After the evaluations were completed, I analyzed specific data gathered from faculty participants across those projects to inform the 1999 article reprinted in this special anniversary issue of *JHEOE* and examine factors that influence faculty participation. What rings as relevant today? What progress has been made in the field—what has changed? What are contemporary trends and directions? In this reflective essay, I aim to explore these questions.

My ideas in this article are informed by several sources of data, all based on observation of patterns across the campuses I've visited and conference or professional development events where I've worked with academic faculty and administrators to advance their engagement agenda, institutionalize support and recognition for the work, and monitor and measure the outcomes and impacts of the work. Consequently, the data are not as systematic and consistent as in the earlier article, but I offer these observations to indicate trends across many campus settings and missions that may provide some insights into progress, persistent challenges, and future directions.

What of the 1999 Article Rings True Today?

First of all, the language of the original article would not be appropriate today in regard to using the terms *public service* or *service*. In 1999, we were only 3 years beyond Boyer's (1996) introduction of the scholarship of engagement as a scholarly approach to "community engagement." An aim of *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990) was to show that there are different contexts and approaches to interaction with knowledge, and these contexts are more integrated and connected than the "three bucket" model that isolates teaching, research, and service from each other and gives

short shrift to a focus on learning or the outcomes of knowledge generation. Across many colleges and universities, one can observe that many faculty members persist in their view that engagement, in all its forms, is just a new word for service. At many places, practitioners of community engagement methodology, especially early career faculty, are still warned that such work carries little weight in performance reviews for promotion and tenure because it has the whiff of service in the view of nonpractitioners who sit on review panels.

This view of engaged scholarship as having lesser value than traditional methods remains sustainable in part because most institutional engagement initiatives continue to depend on a relatively fixed group of reliable faculty who are motivated to use engaged methods based on some combination of their personal values, disciplinary contexts or intellectual interests, and/or belief in the value of engagement for institutional goals and progress. This aspect of the 1999 findings regarding faculty motivation patterns has not changed much, especially among faculty who entered the academic workforce before the turn of the millennium. As a result, the work of engagement is often enclaved, random, and not well supported or recognized. At many institutions (but certainly not all), engagement remains reliant on a core group of well-known engaged faculty and staff, and the agenda of engagement travels somewhat in a bubble of its own, often only weakly tethered to strategic goals or aims of the institution overall.

Consistent with this situation, perceptions of obstacles listed in 1999 have also remained persistent among nonpractitioner faculty, even though many institutions have created policies, infrastructure, and professional development programs to support faculty participation in and recognition for engaged activities linked to teaching, learning, and research. Among faculty who expressed reservations 17 years ago, not many have changed their minds. When they participate in committees, governance activities, and planning processes, these skeptical academics question the legitimacy and the strategic reasons for encouraging community engagement. At some institutions, efforts to create an intentional strategic plan for engagement can be derailed by persistent and repetitive questions about terminology, quality practices, and costs that are presumed to draw funds away from traditional actions. The bottom line is that so long as community engagement work is enacted by a self-selecting group, with separate infrastructure, limited funding, and a random agenda of interaction across community issues and partners, campuses will struggle with sustainability, quality, extent of

benefits to the institutional mission, and ability to measure activity impacts and outcomes.

The factors identified in 1999 as promising ways to enhance faculty members' motivation to adopt engaged methods in their work are still good strategies. Providing systematic faculty development support, sustaining adequate infrastructure for the logistical aspects of engagement, and integrating engagement into the campus mission and goals remain powerful actions that can build an agenda of work in the context of institutional aims for internal and external outcomes. However, today we know that these practices alone are insufficient to move community engagement from a state of random activity and self-selected involvement to an agenda of strategic involvement driven by specific purposes and objectives. Simply said, as higher education experiences massive changes in external and internal expectations and pressures, community engagement has become a compelling aspect of how the sector will respond and adapt, and it is in our strategic interest to be more intentional.

What Progress Has Been Made in the Field— What Has Changed?

There is tremendous diversity across higher education today regarding the strategic importance of community engagement. Some institutions have made little progress, and others have transformed themselves into highly-engaged colleges and universities. Several conspicuous phenomena are responsible for the progress we can see today.

Community engagement practices are proving to be an effective response to core challenges for change that are now occurring across higher education. These include an emphasis on student success and completion, creation of an inclusive and equitable learning environment for all, and a focused agenda of engagement that reflects an alignment between academic strengths and community interests and objectives. These imperatives show us the future context for higher education culture and performance. Success in adapting to these priorities and expectations will be accelerated at institutions that recognize the power of community engagement strategies.

The impact of the 2006 launch of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement cannot be overestimated. Higher education in America has a culture of imitation framed by specific ranking and recognition processes. The Carnegie

Elective Classification instantly triggered the deep desire of almost every institution to succeed as an applicant for such recognition. The process has revealed to all of higher education what a high-quality, sustainable, effective, and assessable framework for community engagement looks like for students, community, faculty, staff, and campus leadership. Whether or not institutions apply for review, the application has become a useful guide for campuses eager to develop a strong and strategic engagement agenda.

More broadly, the national and international discourse on community engagement has expanded around the globe. The emergence of new academic organizations such as the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), the Engaged Scholarship Consortium, or the Talloires Network with its diverse international membership; new conference tracks focused on engaged and community-based scholarship at many disciplinary events; awards for recognition of faculty achievement such as the Ernest A. Lynton Award for the Scholarship of Engagement for Early Career Faculty; and other venues and programs have promulgated new and more sophisticated views of community engagement in all its forms. This expansion created more opportunities for faculty to present and publish their engaged scholarship in the familiar context of peer-reviewed conferences and academic journals. Reflecting considerable changes since 1999, faculty today can present their engaged work in ways that align with traditional cultural values of the academy. Thus, the dynamic of “do it if you want but understand the risk to your career progress” has eroded over the last 15 years as academic culture’s acceptance of engaged scholarship has increased, though barriers remain. Community engagement, as defined by the Carnegie Elective Classification framework, has been affirmed as a scholarly method and, as such, has become a legitimate option for faculty who find the method relevant to their goals, objectives, and areas of intellectual focus in any or all aspects of their scholarly practices. The clash comes when engaged scholarship produces both traditional and nontraditional outputs and impacts that are unfamiliar to nonengaged senior faculty on review panels. O’Meara (*in press*) and others (see O’Meara, Eatman, & Peterson, 2015) tackled this phenomenon through their research on promotion and tenure policies in this time when the demographics of both the faculty and academic culture are clearly changing. This research examines how such policies support or inhibit diverse forms of scholarship techniques and outcomes.

This kind of research and analysis of academic culture is growing in part because a massive workforce change that will transform academic culture is under way. The faculty who provided the data that informed the 1999 article were all similar in age, race, preparation, goals, and working styles. Today, academic culture is very much in flux, and the faculty ranks are diversifying rapidly on many traits.

For the first time since the late 1960s and early 1970s, a large-scale renewal of the academic workforce is in progress. Thousands of faculty were hired in the mid-20th century, and they created the academic culture we have today—a culture that values individualism in scholarly work and assessment for promotion and tenure. Many of these faculty are retiring and being replaced by new faculty who represent new generations—Generation X and Generation Y. At many of the institutions I’ve interacted with over the last year or two, the new generations already make up 35 to 40% of the faculty. Service-learning and other community engagement experiences were often an element of these generations’ learning environment in school, college, and graduate studies and as a result, these new scholars are entering academia with very different characteristics and expectations than Baby Boomers. Results from Cathy Trower’s (2012) large study on new-generation faculty reflect their different working styles and attitudes. Findings reveal that they see both teaching and research as important and related, they value collaboration, they want to organize research around problems rather than narrow questions in one discipline, they believe faculty have a collective responsibility to generate new knowledge, they want transparency in performance review rather than secrecy, and they believe that a life of both the mind and the heart is important to their success. This generation is mobile—seeking both a campus culture and a community environment that align with their scholarly values and family experience. Many have a goal of working at different institutions; some are more interested in mobility than in tenure. They certainly are passionate about diversity of methods and approaches to their work as well as diversity of the campus and surrounding community.

As you can imagine, these traits inform a very different working style and cultural context than that of higher education from the 1950s up to today. There is tension between the generations now working in higher education and on many campuses, community-engaged scholarship as a growing practice and method has been a useful lens to help explore and understand these differences (*O’Meara, in press*). For the first time in decades, as many as

four generations are represented on campus at many institutions (Kezar & Maxey, 2015). Forthcoming changes will be challenging, but the key traits of future faculty suggest a strong alignment with the emerging expectations and strategies that will be the basis for higher education's future (Trower, 2012).

Let me mention one more force of change that has energized more institutional commitment to adopting community engagement strategies in a focused and intentional manner. Consider how the messages of politicians and pundits have criticized and diminished the national appreciation and respect for higher education as a valuable resource for the nation and an invaluable asset for individual opportunity and our nation's social, economic, and democratic fabric. The negativity is frustrating, but all critique, even that which is exaggerated, is based in some truth. American higher education has been extremely stable since the mid-20th century in terms of our business model (reliance on tuition), our curricular models, academic culture that focuses on faculty advancement based more on research than teaching except at a few institutions, random attention to engagement with local and regional issues and opportunities, and a mostly exciting but sometimes not so ethical focus on sports, among other issues. Despite new policy and funding frameworks for education at the state and federal levels, higher education has largely tried to cope without changing core organizational practices and cultures. The sector has been slow to adapt to new conditions and new expectations. Now momentum is building to create change (Kezar & Maxey, 2015). The current and growing attention to innovation in higher education is aimed at renewing the historic role of the sector as was previously expressed in our 20th-century commitment to mass access to higher education as an engine for progress, opportunity, and success in the post-WWII era.

In sum, community engagement began to emerge in the early 1980s as one innovation that could help restore our relevance and involvement in national progress and opportunity. A well-established academic culture that placed the greatest value on individual achievement represented by limited measures of impact greatly restricted the expansion of engagement and other strategies that would have accelerated higher education's adaptation to changing conditions and contexts. Today, a cultural transformation is well under way on many fronts.

What Are Contemporary Trends and Directions?

The generational renewal across universities around the world is an opportunity to celebrate higher education's history and also to activate and illustrate its future role in exploring local and global issues. Through a more blended view of teaching, research, and service—some of which will employ community engagement methods—colleges and universities across America (and other countries) are creating more intentional agendas of involvement focused on topics that are called the “big questions,” “wicked problems,” or “grand challenges” that confront local and global communities. In this strategy of more focused work and in the framing of this article, you can observe how academic culture is shifting from individual work to a more collective approach in which faculty work together and with others to generate new knowledge in the context of complex contemporary and emerging issues. Taking a more intentional approach also allows for the setting of internal and external goals and benchmarks, as well as developing the capacity to track what works and what doesn't. Such an agenda supports our ability to measure and accurately describe our impact.

Now is the time for higher education institutions to step up and create a cultural environment that encourages and rewards both traditional scholarship and new forms of collaborative, interdisciplinary, and engaged work that involve knowledge exchange with other sectors and interactions with nontraditional and nonacademic sources of expertise and wisdom. In such an environment, we can better integrate teaching, learning, and research in ways that will improve the student experience. Engaged teaching and learning is a key element in our efforts to support student success and completion through service-learning, other community-based experiential learning, engaged undergraduate research, and other “high-impact practices” (*Kuh, 2013*). Engaged learning has also been shown to support improved student retention and graduate more satisfied and engaged alumni (*Weerts & Ronca, 2007*).

Simply said, the achievement of institutional excellence and effectiveness will require intentional decisions and plans regarding the role of community engagement in the institution's planning and strategy as well as in cultural values. Going forward, we should see community engagement as core work; it is not an exotic activity for the few who have those motivations described in 1999. In the 21st century, engagement is strategic work, a valuable method of conducting scholarship, and an essential strategy to renew higher education's role in public progress, in partnership with other sectors. The major challenges in every local community have global

implications. Local engagement is as valuable for the large, globally linked, top-ranked research university as it is for regional universities, private colleges, community colleges, and technical institutes—because we all have diverse intellectual strengths to contribute to the nuanced nature of our challenges. As was true more than 50 years ago, higher education has to step up to the plate, with engaged methods as one key strategy, in order to connect its intellectual prowess to partners in other sectors so we can collectively discover ways to create a safe, healthy, sustainable, and equitable future for ourselves and our communities.

Thoughts About Future Research on Community Engagement

The 1999 article was informed by two large, multi-institutional and multi-year projects with grant funding. The institutions were highly diverse in mission, classification, size, and community context. There were many such projects in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but only a few in recent years. Such a model warrants our attention at this critical time of massive change and innovation across higher education. The quality of our understanding of community engagement as a method reflecting a more integrative view of teaching, learning, research, and service will be enriched and advanced by new systematic studies of multi-institutional methods and experiences, guided by specific and compelling research questions explored through analysis of comparable sets of data. For example, the growing database generated by the Carnegie Classification process is already being tapped by researchers.

Now that community-engaged scholarship has gained considerable ground as a valued element of faculty work and culture and as a powerful strategy to advance major change goals for our institutions, we must especially frame rigorous and large-scale studies of the impact higher education has on public issues, aims, and conditions through engaged partnerships. The current emphasis on developing systematic schemes for collecting institutional and national data on higher education's individual and collective impact on local and global questions should inform a great leap forward in the quality and rigor of the study of engagement practices and their effects. How exciting to anticipate more data-informed studies across multiple institutions—perhaps even across nations—that will give us guidance for where the field will go next with the leadership of a new generation of highly motivated academic faculty and staff and a new generation of community leaders and partners.

In my view, such change will likely introduce a “golden age” of higher education as a highly regarded resource for public progress.

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